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Balancing Rights in Religious Education through Collaboration and Dialogue

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Abstract

While the right of parents to educate their children in their religious or philosophical conviction is recognised in Human Rights instruments (e.g. CoE 1952, protocol 1), educators must also attend to the right of a child to autonomy (UN 1989, Article 12.1) and the right of liberal democratic states to reproduce values of equity and freedom. This paper argues that certain forms of inter-religious dialogue and/or inter-religious collaborative learning can assist educators in balancing these rights where religion has significant influence and power over the management of schools and/or the curriculum. It is argued that in addition to the learning benefits which may result, the use of collaboration and dialogue goes some way in addressing three philosophical criticisms of religious education: first that religiously separate and religiously based education pays insufficient attention to the rights of children and, secondly, is likely to contribute to social fragmentation; and third, pupils will lack the skills to overcome prejudice or intolerance where they have no experience of others as a result of separate schooling or from a religiously narrow curriculum, and the latter may in fact support intolerant views. A rationale is developed that asserts the value of collaboration or dialogue as a pedagogical strategy that can, to some degree, mitigate potential negative outcomes from religious education. This argument is further supported with reference to a range of empirical studies.

Keywords: dialogue; collaboration; liberal; communitarian; religious education

Introduction

This paper arises out of a fundamental and perennial question for democratic societies: What is the appropriate role of religion in education and, where religion has significant influence and power over the management of schools and/or the curriculum, how is it possible to balance competing interests of the parents, the child, the state and religious groups?

To help in answering this question I will employ a framework from political theory which distinguishes between communitarian and liberal positions in relation questions of religion in schools. In this I am following others (for

example Feinberg and McDonough 2003) but in particular the work of McLaughlin (2003) who sees the two positions as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

For communitarians, schools ought to be organised around a comprehensive view, such as an established religious tradition. Such an arrangement provides an internally coherent education as part of an overarching tradition which contains a vision of human flourishing (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002), upholds the right of parents to have an education for their children in their religious or philosophical conviction and ensures that the state's commitment to plurality is affirmed (Galston 2005). Furthermore, it is argued that faith schools are beneficial to psychological and social development and thus have the ability to cultivate well-rounded citizens who can contribute to the wider society (Jeynes 2002).

By contrast, liberal theorist Levinson (1999), argues that the state in liberal Western democracies must require children to receive an appropriate autonomy-based education which is detached from their family and immediate community; this is a basic matter of justice for children. She believes 'schools should not reflect fundamental or socially divisive conceptions of the good.' (p. 157). For Levinson, certain challenges must be dealt with by advocates of separate schools such as those schools organised around a religious foundation. This paper begins by exploring these challenges to the influence of religion in education and then considers if the use of dialogue and collaboration could mitigate some of the potentially negative outcomes from religious influence and separation of young people by religion. To conclude it is argued that, when religions have an influence in education, dialogue may assist in the process of mitigating negative outcomes but, to do so, must be grounded on certain aims.

Contemporary Challenges to Religion in Education

In a democratic society, where religious bodies have a role in the control of education and of aspects of the curriculum, liberal theorists believe that there are significant challenges to be addressed; three are considered here.

The first challenge is that children's rights are not sufficiently respected in religious schools or in a religiously narrow curriculum (Mawhinney 2007). The underlying issue is the autonomy of the individual. For Levinson, the development of a capacity for autonomy is a primary aim of education and schools should: 'ensure the freedom of all children ultimately to determine their own path in the world just as adults are free under the liberal state to chart theirs.' (Levinson 1999, 64). One response to this challenge is the right to withdrawal from religious education lessons (Mawhinney et al. 2010), however, this cannot deal with all situations such as where the religious teaching is intended to infuse all aspects of the school day.

The second challenge is that religiously separate schooling will undermine a cohesive vision of the civic life of a society and contribute to social fragmentation or the maintenance of existing social division. Following Dewey's (1915) vision of a common education, many liberal theorists see the school as a microcosm of society and a space where young people learn experientially what democracy is through the day-to-day experience of being with others who may have different comprehensive views (Carr and Hartnett 1996), so where pupils are separated by religion they lack such contact and with it an induction into the common values around which the society functions (McDonough and Feinberg 2003).

The third challenge is of intolerance. This overlaps with the challenge of social fragmentation, and is the view that pupils will lack the skills to overcome prejudice or intolerance where they have limited experience of others as a result of separate schooling or from a religiously narrow curriculum (Callan 1997). Indeed, the latter may in fact support intolerant views (Feinberg 2006). This challenge is regarded as particularly significant in divided or post-conflict societies (Gallagher 2010).

Different democratic states respond to these demands and challenges in a variety of ways in an effort to balance the influence of religion alongside the rights of children and the interests of democratic states, for example through differential financing or inspection mechanisms. Other suggested approaches are the removal of faith-based admissions criteria (Berkeley 2008), minimum quotas of children from 'other faiths' in faith schools (Walford 2010) or the development of 'mutual understanding' curricula (Richardson 2011), but another frequently cited response is to suggest that students in separate schools, or students who receive separate forms of religious education, should dialogue and collaborate with one another, whether through face-to-face interaction, shared experiences or online encounters in order to cultivate their autonomy, tolerance and civic sense of the common good. An evaluation of this claim for the value of dialogue in religiously influenced education is examined in the remainder of this article.

The value of collaboration and dialogue

The value and importance of dialogue and collaboration, is claimed by those along the range of the liberal-communitarian continuum. Levinson (1999, 60) lauds the common school as a site for exchange and dialogue where students can develop democratic values of tolerance and cultivate civic virtues. For Callan, drawing upon Rawls' notion of 'justice as reasonableness', dialogue is a primary task of education (Callan 1997, 177). And, while MacIntyre argues that schools should be organised according to a comprehensive view, he supports the need for pupils to become familiar with other views through contact with those who are different (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 12). Similar recommendations for the importance and value of dialogue in separate and common schools is evident in the work of others representing different theoretical perspectives on our continuum (Feinberg 2013; Strike 2000; Spinner-Halev 2000).

Given this breadth of support, it is important to investigate further and consider the value of dialogue as a pedagogical tool.

Difficult to do

A number of studies from diverse international contexts have highlighted that within citizenship or religious education, dialogue is difficult (Hanna 2016; Ichilov 2005; Akar 2016; Garratt and Piper 2010). Strandbrink (2014, 14) shows from a study of seven northern European states that civic and religious education which is outward facing and 'cosmopolitan' is rare. There persists an approach to citizenship education and religious education which is inward looking, where curricula and/or teachers have the intention of 'safeguarding and strengthening their 'own' views of the world and traditions of faith and belief.' In such situations there is a risk that interaction between students becomes a form of assimilationist peace-building (Gill and Niens 2014) and issues of equality and prejudice may be ignored in an effort to focus on what is common and shared (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2005).

Callan (1997, 220) too, despite his enthusiasm for dialogical pedagogy is concerned by a 'vague but complacent academic orthodoxy about the value of moral dialogue in schools'. Garratt and Piper (2010, 46) provide evidence that young people are under-confident and inhibited when asked to collaborate with other students and Hughes and Loader found that in a post-conflict society where difference was heightened, students 'appeared to consider intergroup dialogue inimical to relationship-building' (Loader and Hughes 2016, 12). For Garratt and Piper (2010, 46) these problems stem from lack of confidence and skills among teachers.

From this we can see that dialogue is not without its difficulties and is likely to be unsuccessful if it is freighted with too much responsibility, aims towards an uncritical view of commonality, is carried out in unstructured ways that raise uncomfortable issues with no obvious means of resolving them and is left to teachers who are underqualified for the task.

Yet, these issues notwithstanding, Callan (1997, 220) is convinced of the need for dialogue in education, because the alternative is avoidance, which he deems 'a blindly regressive social tendency'. Our consideration of the challenges to

religiously influenced education above also highlights the need for mitigating actions such as dialogical encounters with others who hold different comprehensive views. Democratic societies do not reproduce by default and schools are a primary vehicle wherein the values and habits of citizenship, including principles and practices of coexistence, need to be cultivated (Gallagher 2010).

How Can Dialogue Respond to the Challenges?

On what grounds, then, might dialogue be considered a valuable tool in balancing competing interests in religious education? As we have seen, dialogue is welcomed across the liberal-communitarian divide and it connects with a shared understanding that education must, to some degree, prepare young people to share civic spaces and public institutions and so take a full place in a plural society. However, we have also seen that dialogue has a certain job to do. In particular, where religion has an influence in education, the dialogue must have certain characteristics if it is to respond to the challenges noted above. It must have the aim to support autonomy, build cohesive societies and develop tolerance.

Helpfully, a growing interest in this area of dialogue in education means that a number of studies can help us to understand the processes of dialogue, collaboration and exchange and under what conditions they may contribute to the aims above.

For Ipgrave (2013), aims such as those noted above cannot be achieved simply through the open expression of individual ideas, rather, if an aim such as autonomy is to be increased through dialogue students must encounter new meanings and must select from their existing repertoire in appropriate ways to respond. This is close to what Matusov (2009) calls 'ontological engagement' in dialogue. In order to achieve this level of engagement, dialogue should be layered and progressive (Fancourt 2009; Ipgrave 2012; Ipgrave 2016) and take religious

views seriously (Ipgrave 2012). In understanding these demands, the teacher can play a pivotal role in providing opportunities that develop agency.

In relation to building cohesive societies and addressing intolerance, Orchard (2015) suggests there is a tendency to exaggerate the contribution religious education can make in this area. Others agree that dialogue in education cannot of itself resolve wider societal divisions (Reilly and Niens 2014) and it will lack significance if it ignores critical issues of justice and equality (Gill and Niens 2014), but a number of studies which pay particular attention to contextual factors of dialogue and collaborative learning (Fancourt 2016; Hughes 2014; Hughes et al. 2010) suggest that there can be out of school benefits from in-school encounters. Currently in Northern Ireland, the government is funding initiatives which involve shared education between schools with pupils from different sides of the societal divide. Though the analytical lens of contact theory Hughes (2014) notes that a positive contribution can be made to wider social cohesion when collaborative and dialogical engagements occur through the reduction of fear and anxiety and the development of greater trust towards outgroup members. However, she points out that such successes are most likely when certain characteristics of engagement are present: the contact between young people is sustained; there is preparation for dialogue; and opportunities exist outside of the school to develop relationships.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that these aims for dialogue are not uncontroversial. Within the context of religious education others have noted the complexity and diversity of views on autonomy (Jackson 2015), cohesion (Walford 2010) and tolerance (McKenna, Neill, and Jackson 2009), so work needs to be done to further define the nature of these aims and the pedagogical strategies needed to achieve them. Nonetheless, the force of the argument being made here is that, where religious influence in schooling causes separation of pupil populations or the narrowing of the curriculum, dialogue which is

grounded in aims of autonomy, cohesion and tolerance has the potential to be an important asset in balancing competing interests on the issue of religious influence in education. Further, given this potential, there is a case to be made that dialogical education is expected of religious schools or schools where single identity religious education is available. In the UK, up to the present, dialogical education in relation to religion has been 'small scale and under-funded and time limited, usually implemented only in response to some form of tension or conflict' (Cantle 2013, 9). And in Northern Ireland, even where the teaching of controversial issues relating to the political conflict is part of the school curriculum (Emerson and McCully 2014), there is no expectation for dialogue or collaboration in the religious education syllabus provided by the Christian churches in the region.

Given the level of agreement around the importance of dialogue from theorists occupying a diverse range of positions on the liberal-communitarian continuum, there is a reasonable case for saying that dialogical exchange ought to be a signature pedagogy in religious education. Just as practicals and experiments are intrinsic to science education, the use of source material to history education or the field trip to environmental science, the use of dialogue and collaborative learning should be an entitlement for all young people in religious education.

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